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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study was conducted of the ways people accommodate television in social interaction in contrast to the way they accommodate other individuals. Videotapes were made of five dyads--composed of members of a college speech course--who were told to wait in a small room before they were needed for a study. Each dyad was subjected to four different five-minute conditions: (1) they were left alone; (2) a confederate was brought in, presumably also to wait for the study; (3) a videotape recording of a television talk show was turned on; and (4) one dyad member was asked to leave the room, after which the videotape was either left on or turned off. Subjects then completed questionnaires about their experiences. Analyses of the data regarding frequency of eye gaze shift and topic shift, amount and content of talk, and self-report responses suggested that television reduces the amount of interpersonal interaction, influencing patterns of eye contact, number of topics discussed, and overall amount and content of conversation. Among the other conclusions were that interaction is partially determined by construction of a shared social reality; that when television is present it generates a substantial number of the messages in verbal interaction; and that television is perceived as less obtrusive and less threatening than interpersonal interaction. (GT)

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Television's Effect on Eye Gaze, Topic Shift, Amount of Talk and Topical Agenda During Dyadic Interaction

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Television's Effect on Eye Gaze, Topic Shift, Amount of Talk, and Topical Agenda During Dyadic Interaction

Television is a pervasive common denominator which uniquely connects individuals in social interaction. This study is an attempt at discovering just what constitutes that special interaction. There are many ways to approach the study of television audience behavior. The recent review by Comstock et al. (1978) provides a synthesis of the work that has been done in this area. There is no lack of conducted research. However there has been only a limited number of theoretical approaches and methods used in data collection and analysis. For instance, a study by Bechtel et al. (1972) is one of the few attempts at recording and analyzing television audience behavior as it actually occurs. That study, while unique in approach, lacked any definitive findings on the nature of audience behavior, and few implications were suggested from the analysis.

Recent suggestions for the study of audience behavior have outlined alternatives to traditional theoretical perspectives and methods.[1] However, very little research has accompanied these recommendations. A program of research which emphasizes direct observation of the media environment is being developed at the University of California at Santa Barbara. A variety of theoretical perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and the interpretive paradigm are being taken in conjunction with ethnographies

and other naturalist and quasi-naturalistic data collection methods. Theoretical purification will be necessary, but the time has come to make use of alternative perspectives and methods in research settings to find whether or not they are as pragmatically productive as they are conceptually arousing.

A recurring theme in the communication literature is the acknowledgement that the traditional stimulus-response causal model is inadequate to accurately define or describe much of communicative interaction, either on an interpersonal or a mass communicative level.[2] Individuals during the "process of communication"[3] interact with one another and are interdependent in creating the communicative event. Communication is on going, symbolic interaction. These definitions, while conceptually attractive, nonetheless become problematic for the communications researcher because of the difficulty of capturing and analyzing the process. The approach used in this study was designed to confront those problems and study the communication process at close range.

The major objective of this paper, therefore, is to present an initial interactional analysis in the study of television audience behavior. The focus of the analysis will be on interpersonal and conversational variables of social interaction.

The following work is intended to provide initial data in developing an understanding of the ways people "accommodate" television in social interaction in contrast to

how they accommodate other social actors. Accommodation is the way actors use, refer to, include, and generally integrate a communicative source into an interaction. This study examines three specific behaviors, across four stimulus conditions, and provides a qualitative descriptive analysis of interaction with examples taken from detailed transcripts.

It is widely assumed in interpersonal communication theory that the self is developed in relation to others within a social environment.[4] One question asked years ago by Horton and Wohl (1956) is, "Do social actors actualize and maintain themselves through vicarious interaction with the media?" If so, how do they do it? One way of approaching an interactional event is to record the behavior of the actors. With that baseline data many analyses can be generated. The following analysis begins to sketch a preliminary outline of television audience behavior with Horton and Wohl's question in mind.

Analyses of eye gaze, topic change and amount of talk are provided to show patterns of behavior. A content analysis of conversation is included to show the "doing"[5] of the interaction. Results of a self-report survey are included to supplement the observations. How are individuals accommodated in social interaction? How is television accommodated? An attempt is made in this study to identify some of the characteristics of how we "do" interaction with the media, in this instance television, and how that is related to how we "do" interaction with others.

METHOD

Videotapes were made of five interpersonal dyads. The subjects were volunteers from a basic speech course. They were unaware of the nature of the research. Each dyad was escorted to the research setting and told that there would be a short wait before their participation was needed. The research setting consisted of a small clinic room with a covered two-way mirror. Two chairs were placed in the room adjacent to one another, with a small table between the chairs. A videotape playback monitor was present in the room as the subjects entered. A small Vidicon camera was attached under a shelf in the opposite corner of the room. A microphone hung from the ceiling but was not visible to the subjects. Each dyad was subjected to four different conditions:

Condition 1: The dyad was left alone to talk to each other.

Condition 2: A confederate was brought into the room by the researcher and introduced as another subject who was also waiting to participate in the study.

Condition 3: The video playback monitor was turned on, and the dyad was told that they would have to wait longer than expected.

Condition 4: One member of the dyad, designated A by his/her position in the room, was asked to depart the room leaving one subject alone in the room. The videotape monitor

was either left on or turned on depending on the prior condition. The order of presentation of conditions 2 and 3 was rotated to reduce the likelihood of ordering effects. Condition 1 was always presented first, and condition 4 was always presented last.

The confederate was a male undergraduate student. His instructions were to respond normally but not to initiate any conversation. The videotape recording played back was a segment of the "Tonight Show" starring Johnny Carson.

Each condition lasted five minutes. A three-minute period from the middle of each condition was used as data for analyses. Following the completion of the four conditions, subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire reporting their experiences during the four conditions. They were then debriefed regarding the nature of the study.

ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Five basic analyses of the data were conducted: Frequency of eye gaze shift, frequency of topic shift, amount of talk, content of the conversation, and self-report responses to the experience.

Eye Gaze Shift

Eye gaze shift was coded by the researcher by viewing the videotapes. Eye gaze shift was noted for each subject

in each of the four conditions and coded using established categories: Condition 1 - looking at dyad partner or looking away from dyad partner; Condition 2 - looking at dyad partner, looking at confederate or looking away; Condition 3 - looking at dyad partner, looking at television, or looking away; Condition 4 - looking at television or looking away. Frequency of eye gaze shift was determined for individuals and dyads within conditions and cumulatively. Means were calculated for rows and columns by dyad, condition, and individual (see Table 1).

Topic Shift

Topic shift was determined by reviewing transcripts of the interaction and by viewing the videotapes. Criteria for coding topic shift were based on a turn-taking model developed by Sacks et al. (1974). It is based on an emphasis on topic, not a shift in turn. For instance, it is possible to change the topic within an utterance:

> Now you can tell it's there (short pause). That's interesting communication, have you ever tried to communicate with a blind person or something?

The subject begins the utterance by referring to some high-pitched sound he noticed in the room, then comments generally about communication being interesting, then shifts the topic a third time to communicating with blind people. The first shift provides for a transition to the second shift. The

number of topic shifts are reported for each subject and dyad. Mean scores are provided for all subjects within each condition (see Table 2).

Amount of Talk

The amount of talk was measured in seconds and rounded to the nearest half second. Each utterance on the videotape recording was timed. Cumulative totals for each individual and each dyad, as well as mean totals for all subjects, are reported for each condition (see Table 3).

Content Analysis

Detailed transcripts were made from the videotape recordings. A qualitative content analysis was made of the transcripts, focusing on regularities such as openings, transitions, topics; peculiarities such as events unique to a particular dyad or condition; patterns such as events that occurred across conditions or dyads; similarities and topic.

Self-Report

The self-report was in the form of a questionnaire containing 24 questions. There were six dimensions of communication on which the questions focused: interest, comfort, understanding, attention, control, and enjoyment. Four questions were developed for each dimension. Each of the four related directly to one of

the four stimulus conditions to which the subjects had been exposed. Questions were answered on a seven-point Likert-type scale with intermittent inverse polarization to reduce the likelihood of ordering effect. "Agree" and "Disagree" were used as polar adjectives on the scale. Response values were calculated for subjects, and dyads and means were determined within conditions (see Table 4).

RESULTS

Although no statistical tests were performed with the data, differences were clearly suggested between conditions for all the subjects and dyads across conditions in the analyses of eye gaze, topic change, and amount of talk. Clear patterns emerged in the content analysis of the conversational interaction and the self-reports reinforce the findings of the other analyses. Each analysis will be reported separately in this section; relationships which exist among the separate analyses will be taken up in the Discussion section to follow.

Eye Gaze Shift

There are differences between conditions for all subjects and dyads.' There are also differences between conditions for the mean scores. The most striking contrasts can be seen when the conditions with television are compared to those without television. The mean scores show that there

is a large decrease in the amount of eye gaze shift when the television is turned on. When the subjects with the highest amount of eye gaze shift from each dyad are combined and the subjects with lowest amount of eye gaze shift are combined, the comparative means from those two groups reveal some interesting findings (see Table 5). The high-shift group shows very little difference between condition 1, the dyad alone, and condition 2, the dyad plus the confederate. There is a fairly large difference between conditions 1 and 2 compared with condition 3, the dyad with the television. In contrast to the high-shift group, the low eye gaze shift group showed very little difference between conditions 1 and 3, but both of these conditions were very different from condition 2. Given some of the recent research on eye contact, these findings can be interpreted in at least one theoretically intriguing way. High eye shift has been correlated with low self-esteem and low eye shift with high self-esteem.[6] If those findings are used as criteria for interpretation, the high eye-shift group can be seen as having more self-esteem when the television is turned on. That would seem to support a positive response to Horton and Wohl's (1956) question regarding whether social actors can self-actualize during vicarious interaction with television.

Turning attention to the low eye gaze shift group, it can be seen that the data also support a positive response to the question. Although there is very little difference

in eye gaze shift between being alone with their dyadic partner and having the television turned on, there is a large increase in eye gaze shift when the third person is present. This could indicate that additional interpersonal contact is more threatening than having the constant presence of the television interposed in the interaction.

Topic Shift

Topic shift, like eye gaze shift, showed apparent differences when conditions 1 and 2 were compared with condition 3, the dyad with television. Mean values for individuals and dyads within conditions reflect similarities between the dyad and the triad in amount of topic shift. When the television is interposed on the interaction of the dyad, there is a very noticable decrease in the amount of topic shift. In every case, both individually and interactively, the least topic shift occurred when the television was turned on. One explanation for this can be more clearly seen in the content analysis, but I will briefly mention here that the subjects, while interacting interpersonally, were dependent on internal and inanimate external stimulus for topic invention. Once the television was turned on, it was used as the only resource for topic selection. Another explanation will become apparent in discussing the amount of talk. There was less talk when the television was turned on, therefore less topic shift.

Amount of Talk

Analysis of these data revealed similar findings to

those of eye gaze shift and topic shift. There was little difference between conditions 1 and 2, but there was a large decrease in the amount of talk in condition 3. These findings support the notion that the presence of a television in the social environment has a dramatic influence on the communicative interaction that takes place. The mean values indicated that the amount of talk, while the television was on, was reduced by half. One possible explanation for this finding is that television is a constant source of messages. While television messages can be ignored, it would take a great deal of effort to disconfirm those messages for any length of time. Therefore, there is a tendency to relax and let the television control the flow of the interaction.

Content Analysis

Like the previous findings, the content analysis showed that the patterns of interaction in conditions 1 and 2 were very similar. The interaction in condition 3 can be highly contrasted with them. Before discussing the differences between conditions, I will make some general statements about the conversational interaction. The initial topic in all five dyads was some indication or reference to the situation at hand. The following are examples from each dyad:

1 B Well this is the speech and hearing building.

2 A Then what are we doing.
B Um, I don't know.

3 A I know they're probably listening to us.
B Taped and probably microphoned.

4 A I wonder what they are looking for.
B This isn't the time I signed up for.

5 B Was somebody signed up for, are you an eight o'clock?
A I'm an eight o'clocker an' there was supposed to be another person, but they didn't show up.

As can be seen, the topic was established from some situational event. The subjects then proceeded to build on the topic to some event within their field of experience. The following excerpt exemplifies this:

(This is a continuation of excerpt 3 above)

A Um hmmm
B heheheha, no wait, I can usually tell if these are on. Did you take Speech 11?
A Ye no unun
B You didn't
A No
B That was so fun, I loved that class.

This pattern of interaction occurred across dyads and across conditions indicating that one of the primary objectives of the interaction was to construct a shared social reality on which to base their communicative interaction. That ethnomethodological notion became very important in light of the contrast in the interaction due to the presence of the television. In condition 3, the television was the only resource used for the construction of the conversation. While there was topic shift using the established criteria, all of the conversation in condition 3 was based on, or connected to, the television. Six categories of "TV talk" were drawn from the content analysis of the transcripts:

1. Talk about what is on TV - conversation that refers to the present program.

(example)

B Check out this guy's hands
A What?
B Check out this guy's hands
A Why?
B One hand's in his pocket, the other hand he talks with, now watch what happens...

2. Talk related to ones own media experience--conversation that is initiated by the TV but specifically refers to some personal experience with the media.

(example)

A You know I was in that studio where Johnny Carson is from
B My roommate's...um...um...father's a cameraman for ABC

3. Talk about the presence of the TV--conversation that refers specifically to the presence of the TV in the social environment.

(example)

A Why are we watching this?
B Who knows?

4. Talk about TV or media in general--conversation that is generated by the TV about TV or some other medium but does not refer specifically to the present program.

(example)

B I don't know I haven't watched TV for about two years...
A Oh, I watch it um quite a bit because I'm living in the dorms.

5. Talk generated by the TV--conversation that is related to the current program.

(example)

B I haven't seen Johnny Carson for ages!
A He's pretty much going to quit from what I hear.

6. Talk generated by the TV about one's own general experience--conversation that is generated by the TV, but is not about the TV or a media experience.

(example)

B Straighten his tie, and whenever he just reminds me of me, and my neck...
A Umhmm.
B I don't know, my neck really gets tight sometimes.

Since all of the conversation which took place in condition 3 fell into one of the six categories, it can be argued that the subjects' shared social reality in condition 3 was constructed through their communicative interaction and that their communicative interaction was suggested by the presence and content of television.

The subjects integrated the television into the interaction by making it a resource for the generation of conversational topics. Accommodating the television in that way allowed the subjects to accomplish a basis for relational balance. Each subject brought to this interaction a prior set of experiences with television. Each subject displayed this knowledge in the initial conversation with the television present.

Dyad I

B - This is an old one

A - Yeah

B indicates that the program is an older re-run. A immediately responds by acknowledging that the program was indeed an old re-run. A thus indicating to B that s/he too was knowledgeable. That interact created a common basis on which to ground further interaction. The subjects in affect were in an interdependent relationship. The television provided them with an easily recognizable and available means to create a mutually acceptable level of interaction.

Dyad II

A. He entertains us with Johnny Carson.
Oh maybe this is part of it.

B. You never know (laughter). Well I leave them off.

A. You a .

B. Get too comfortable. A little TV.
Look at those curtains.

A. Pretty weird.

B. Really. I got the fabric, it's gold and silver lemay, you know that I had to cut up.

A. Um hum.

B had been dominating the conversation through the previous conditions. At this point, a few moments after the television was turned on, A begins an attempt to obtain control of the topic. A eventually accomplishes partial topic control by accommodating the television in the interaction.

A. You know I was in that studio where Johnny Carson is from.

B. Really?

Until this point B had been controlling the topical agenda by disclosing a variety of stories. A had no previous knowledge of B's experiences and had difficulty reciprocating. A by accommodating the television created a social object with a common basis of interpretation. The television in a vicarious manner became part of the communicative interaction by intejecting messages. B was obliged to accommodate the television once s/he recognized A's action because a more

reciprocally balanced interaction was possible.

Dyad III

A. This is really strange. I feel like I'm a (laughter) I love Johnny Carson.

B. So do I. I don't watch here at school at all.

A. I know I just read something about him in People.

B. What did it say?

Accommodation of the television as a resource for conversation was immediate for both A and B. The television presented an object and A and B focused their interaction on it. The television messages were consistently integrated into the conversation. Both A and B had equal access to the television object, creating a more equally balanced conversation when compared to other conditions.

Dyad IV

A. Johnny Carson. They haven't been showing any news yet.

B. What?

A. Have they?

B. I don't know I haven't watched any TV for about two years.

As with the other dyads the accommodation process begins immediately when the television is introduced into the environment. The television was interpreted as a social object. It provided a resource for the conversational topic.

Television maintains its status as a common reference to base conversation even though B initially claims a lack of any recent experience with it. Moments later B reveals that s/he is in fact knowledgable.

B. I haven't seen Johnny Carson for ages.

A. He's pretty much going to quit from what I hear.

B. He was and then he changed his mind. I think.

A. Oh he did?

B. Yeah.

This interaction partially reveals the embedded nature of the television object in interpersonal interaction. Even though B denies engaging in television viewing, television is nonetheless maintained as a relevant object in his/her repertoire.

Dyad V

During the sampling period no conversation took place. The television object totally dominated the interaction that took place during this period. The television was accommodated as the only source of messages. The television created a communicative environment where negotiation of conversational interaction was unnecessary.

Self-Report

Findings of the questionnaires were consistent with the findings from the other analyses. While no statistical tests were run on the results, the cumulative values of the six dimensions lend some support to the other findings. The

results of the self-report again differentiate conditions 1 and 2 from condition 3. Some general indications of the self-reports were subjects had fairly accurate perceptions of one another. There was generally more interest in the TV than in the confederate. The subjects felt more comfortable with the television turned on. The subject that was left alone with the TV reported paying less attention to it while alone than when the other subject was present. Subjects felt most in control of the situation when the TV was turned on. In general, these findings reinforce the previous analyses.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the analyses partially reveal the nature of the differences in human interaction that takes place when television is present in the environment compared to when it is not present. The way we "do" interaction with others is at least partially determined by constructing a shared social reality through the process of communicative interaction. The way we do interaction with television present assigns a special role to the medium as it generates a substantial amount of the messages used in verbal interaction. Television is perceived as less obtrusive, and less threatening than interpersonal interaction. Less involvement, less effort, and less presentation of the self are required for vicarious interaction with television than for interpersonal interaction. Some type of self-actualization may also be possible through the medium. The television

environment seems to neutralize any relational imbalance which exists in interpersonal interaction.

It should be understood that this was an exploratory study. The methods of data collection and analyses are in need of refinement. The interpretation of these data is open to extension and re-evaluation. The perspective with which one approaches this type of data is certain to include bits of information at the exclusion of others. However, the value of this preliminary investigation cannot be overlooked.

All of the data analyzed in this study contributed to a primary conclusion. Television reduces the amount of interpersonal interaction by influencing patterns of eye contact, the number of topics discussed, the overall amount of talk which is generated by social actors, and what is said in conversations in the presence of the activated set. This data re-affirms the potential value and need for more observational research which is conducted in the media environment.

TABLE 1

Frequency of Eye Gaze Shift

	Dyad 1		Dyad 2		Dyad 3		Dyad 4		Dyad 5		Row Totals	Row Mean Individual	Row Mean Dyad
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B			
Condition 1: Dyad Alone	23	40	44	24	33	116	39	50	27	57	453	45.3	90.6
Condition 2: Dyad + Conf.	17	49	25	57	27	51	94	53	24	61	458	45.8	91.6
Condition 3: Dyad + TV	35	25	53	32	26	47	42	48	30	35	373	37.3	74.5
Condition 4: Subject A & TV	21		39		29		15		11		115	23.0	
Column* Individual Total	75	114	122	113	86	214	175	151	81	153			
Mean	25	38	40.6	37.6	28.6	71.3	58.3	50.3	27	51			
Dyad Total	189		235		300		326		234				
Mean	94.5		117.5		150		163		117				

*Less Condition 4

TABLE 2

Topic Shift

	Dyad 1		Dyad 2		Dyad 3		Dyad 4		Dyad 5		Means			
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	Indiv.	Dyad
Condition 1: Dyad Alone	6	12	8	14	5	12	11	5	6	8	7.2	10.2	8.7	17.4
Condition 2: Dyad + Conf.	2	6	2	10	9	18	11	10	7	9	6.2	10.6	8.4	16.8
Condition 3: Dyad + TV	1	5	4	8	4	7	6	3	0	0	3.0	4.6	3.8	7.6

TABLE 3

Amount of Talk
(Measured in Seconds)

	Dyad		Dyad 2		Dyad 3		Dyad 4		Dyad 5		Means			
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	Indiv.	Dyad
Condition 1: Dyad Alone	45	129.5	109	87	47.5	151.5	137	47	48.5	89.5	77.5	101	89	178
Condition 2: Dyad + Conf.	36	126	20	147	67.5	110.5	80.5	74	26.5	113	46	114	80	160
Condition 3: Dyad + TV	13	43	70	103	31	39	82	19.5	0	0	39	41	40	80

TABLE 4

Results of Questionnaire

Question	Dyad 1		Dyad 2		Dyad 3		Dyad 4		Dyad 5		Totals	Row Means
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B		
1 Part. Int.	3	3	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	19	1.9
2 Int. Part.	2	4	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	3	17	1.7
3 Int. Conf.	2	3	4	1	4	4	4	4	2	6	34	3.4
4 Int. TV	5	1	2	3	1	5	3	5	1	2	28	2.8
5 Comf. Part.	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	5	4	2	20	2.0
6 Comf. Conf.	2	1	2	1	2	3	6	4	4	6	31	3.1
7 Part. TV	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	4	2	16	1.6
8 Comf. TV	6	-	1	-	2	-	7	-	1	-	17	3.4
9 Part. Und.	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	3	2	16	1.6
10 Und. Part.	1	2	2	1	1	1	7	3	1	7	26	2.6
11 Und. Conf.	1	3	4	1	2	1	4	2	1	5	24	2.4
12 Und. TV	1	1	1	6	1	4	2	7	3	7	33	3.3
13 Attn. Part.	2	6	1	2	1	1	7	3	1	7	31	3.1
14 Attn. Part/Conf.	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	7	20	2.0
15 Attn. TV	7	-	6	-	6	-	7	-	1	-	27	5.4
16 Attn. TV Part.	3	2	3	7	2	3	3	2	1	1	27	2.7
17 Cont. Part.	2	3	1	1	4	1	2	4	4	3	25	2.5
18 Cont. Conf.	3	3	2	1	1	3	5	4	4	7	33	3.3
19 Cont. W/TV Part.	2	5	2	1	4	2	2	4	3	7	32	3.2
20 Cont. W/TV	2	-	2	1	1	-	2	-	7	-	9	1.8
21 Enj. Part.	3	2	2	1	1	1	2	3	2	2	19	1.9
22 Enj. Conf.	1	1	2	1	4	4	6	3	2	5	29	2.9
23 Enj. TV W/Part.	2	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	2	2	20	2.0
24 Enj. TV	3	-	1	-	1	-	5	-	1	-	11	2.2
Column Means Individuals	25	235	2	185	19	205	345	33	43	208		
Dyad	2.42		1.75		1.97		3.37		3.19			

TABLE 5

Frequency of Eye Gaze Shift

High Subjects by Low Subjects

	Cumulative High Shift per Dyad		Cumulative Low Shift per Dyad	
	Total	Mean	Total	Mean
Condition 1: Dyad Alone	296	59.2	157	31.4
Condition 2: Dyad + Conf.	280	56.0	178	59.3
Condition 3: Dyad + TV	202	40.4	171	34.2

FOOTNOTES

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